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Mohammedan Writers on Slavs and Russians

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## MOHAMMEDAN WRITERS ON SLAVS AND RUSSIANS.

THE following narratives or reports on Slavs and Russians belong to the 9th and 10th centuries and are taken from the collection published in St. Petersburg by A. Harkavy in 1870 under the title *Skazaniya mussulmanskikh pisatelei o slavyanakh i russkikh* (*References of Mohammedan writers to the Slavs and Russians*), from the second half of the 7th to the end of the 10th century A.D. Mr. Harkavy has given a Russian translation of twenty-six Arabian authors in all, accompanying the extracts with copious notes and commentaries. Many of the extracts, however, can have no possible interest for the average student of Russian and Slavonic history, as they contain only geographical data with an occasional allusion to the name of Russia or some other Slavonic country, and often repeat each other. At the same time the geographical and ethnographical knowledge of the Arabian writers of those times was so confused and sometimes so fantastic that historians are often compelled to ignore them altogether. I have therefore thought it sufficient to confine myself only to those extracts, or parts of them, which relate to some social or political subject, and tell of customs, campaigns and peoples. Out of the twenty-six authors translated into Russian by Harkavy I have thus selected only nine, and all these belong to the 10th century.

In rendering these extracts into English I have added brief notes where most necessary, based principally on Harkavy's notes in his work, *Skazaniya*.

### I.

*From the Book of Roads and States by Abū'l-Kāsim 'Ubaid Allāh ibn 'Abd Allāh, known as Ibn Khurdādhbah (written in the sixties and seventies of the 9th century).*

The author was of Persian origin. The name Khurdādhbah means in Persian "the beautiful gift of the sun." He was the postmaster-general of Kūhistan, that is, he held an office which

at that time combined the functions of a political agent and a chief of police. From 880 till his death in 912 he lived in Baghdad. Harkavy has translated seven small fragments of the *Book* above mentioned. But it is only the fifth fragment which has some interest, as it is the first trustworthy and accurate information which can be found in Arabian literature on the subject of the Russians, in this instance about their trade. As there is already an English translation of this fragment from the original made by Sprenger and published in the *Journal* of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Vol. XIII, 1844), I prefer to give it here instead of translating the Russian version from Harkavy :

“ The Russian merchants, who are of Slavonian origin, export the furs of beavers <sup>1</sup> and of black foxes from the most distant part of the Slavonian country, and bring them to the coast of the Rumish (Black) Sea,<sup>2</sup> where the Greek emperor levies customs on them. Or if they choose, they enter the river of the Slavonians (the Volga), and they pass into the Gulf, the town of the Khazar, where they are taxed by the Khazar king, and thence they continue their voyage into the Sea of Jorjan (the Caspian), there they land on any coast they like. The length of the sea is five hundred farsangs. Sometimes they transport their goods on camels from Jorjan to Baghdad.”

## II.

*From the Book of Countries by Ahmad ibn Abī Ya'kūb ibn Wāḍih al-Kātib, known as al-Ya'kūbī, written in 891-92.*

Harkavy prints two fragments of this author. One of these mentions “ Slavs ” against whom the Caliph Maṣṣūr (754-75) sent his son Al-Mahdī to fight, and the other mentions an invasion by the “ Russians ” of Seville in Spain. I translate here only this last fragment, not on account of its general interest, as it has none, but on account of a great controversy among students of Russian history to which these few lines of the Arabian writer Ya'kūbī gave a new impetus.

Among Russian historians there have been, and still are, several theories as to the origin of Russia, which may be divided into two principal schools : the Normanists and the anti-Normanists. To the first belonged Karamzin, Pogodin, the Czech scholar Šafařík, the Slovene Miklosick, and many others. They maintained that there was a Norman period of Russian history, from the year 859 to the death of Yaroslav I in 1054, which left a deep mark on the whole life of the Russian people, on their

<sup>1</sup> Harkavy, as well as Fröhn, calls them *otters*.

<sup>2</sup> Harkavy is not sure that it may not mean the Mediterranean Sea

state, laws, religion and even language. The anti-Normanists deny this, and insist that the invitation to the Varangers to come and rule the country had no influence whatever on the purely Slavonic habits, customs, laws, etc., of the people. The principal champion of this latter theory was K. N. Bestuzhev-Ryumin, who had on his side the historians Ilovaysky, and in some measure Solovyev, Kostomarov and others.

A good account of this controversy, which has even now a great significance for any student of social and national psychology, was given by the Danish linguist, Vilhelm Thomsen, in his book *The Relations between Ancient Russia and Scandinavia and the Origin of the Russian State*, published in London, 1877. It so happened that, just about the time when the anti-Normanist school in Russia seemed to get the upper hand over its opponents, there appeared (in 1860) a Latin translation by the Dutch orientalist de Goeje of Ya'kūbī's *Book of Countries*, in which the Rus are clearly identified with the Northmen. The passage concerned is quoted among others by Harkavy, and runs as follows:

"To the west of the town called Al-Jazīrah (Algeciras) there is a town called Ishbiliyah (Seville), situated by a great river which is the river Kurtubah (Guadalquivir). Into this town entered the pagans (in the Arabian text 'Majūs'), who are called Rūs, in the year 229 (843-44), and took prisoners<sup>1</sup> and ravaged and burned and murdered."

This passage must have been a godsend to the Normanist school; but in his commentary on it Harkavy, while counting himself not sufficiently competent to take sides in a controversy on so complicated a point of history, nevertheless altogether denies Ya'kūbī's authorship of the words, "who are called Rūs," and ascribes them to a later copyist who transcribed the book in the year 1262. It would, however, require too much space to give all Harkavy's arguments. It need only be added that they seemed to make a great impression on Thomsen, himself a strong Normanist, who is compelled to admit that "neither the passage from Aḥmad al-Ya'kūbī nor that from Mas'ūdī can be adduced as positive proof that the Rūs, *i.e.*, the Rūs of the Arabians, were Northmen."

### III.

*From the History of Kings by Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd al-Ṭabarī (written about 914-15).*

<sup>1</sup> Thomsen translates it: "and *plundered* and ravaged, and burned and murdered."

The following fragment may also be translated here as bearing on the question of the origin of Russia :

“ In Bāb al-Abwāb (Derbend) there was then (in 644 A.D.) a king called Shahriyār ; he met ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (who was then fighting against the Khazar) and concluded peace on condition of not paying a tribute, saying : ‘ I am between two enemies, one the Khazars and the other the Rūs, who are enemies of the whole world, especially of the Arabs, but except for our local people no one can fight them. Instead of paying tribute we shall fight the Rūs ourselves and with our own arms and not let them come out from their country. Count this to be our annual tribute and tax.’ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān replied, ‘ There is above me a higher commander. I will let him know,’ and he sent Shahriyār with one of his men to Surākah, who said, ‘ I will report this to ‘Umar.’ When ‘Umar heard of it he agreed to count this as a war contribution. And this custom was introduced in all the mountain passes, where they did not pay taxes or tributes, on condition that they should not let the infidels fight them and keep them away from the land of the Mohammedans.”

This passage was the subject of much comment by the Russian academician A. A. Kunik, V. I. Lemansky, S. P. Gedenov and other Russian historians and orientalists. However, Harkavy doubts very much whether it really represents events of the 7th century and whether it was not inserted by Tabarī as a reflection of the knowledge and mind of Tabarī’s own times.

#### IV.

*From the Narrative of Ahmad ibn Fudlān<sup>1</sup> ibn ‘Abbās ibn Rāshid ibn Ḥammād (written in the twenties of the 10th century).*

This is one of the most important works of Arab writers on Eastern Europe. The author was member of a delegation sent by the Caliph Muktaḍir from Baghdad in June, 921, to the Volga Bulgars. It is not certain how long this delegation stayed on the Volga, but Harkavy thinks that it must have remained there for several years, though Ibn Fudlān himself, as appears from some passages of the text, seems to have returned earlier.

As the reader will notice, Ibn Fudlān calls the Volga Bulgars Slavs, but Harkavy, basing himself on the studies of Frāhn, Venelin, V. V. Grigoryev, S. Uvarov, P. Keppn and others, maintains that the Arabian author simply used the name Slav as a general geographical term for the inhabitants of North-eastern Europe, but that in reality the Volga Bulgars were a race distinct from the Slavs, and the latter, intermixing with them, were ultimately absorbed by the Turco-Finnish elements,

<sup>1</sup> Some orientalists pronounce this name Ibn Foszlān, amongst them Frāhn and Rasmussen.

whereas on the Danube the Slavs absorbed the Turks. A part of Ibn Fudlān's narrative, relating to the funeral ceremonies, has already been published in the *Slavonic Review* (Vol. VI, June, 1927) in a translation from the Czech language. To reproduce it here again would be superfluous. We will therefore confine ourselves to a translation as given below of those fragments of Fudlān's narrative which are given in Harkavy's book and have not yet appeared in English.

"When we were at a distance of a day and a night from the King of the Slavs, he sent to meet us four kings who are subordinate to him, and his brothers and children. They met us with bread, meat and millet, and joined us.

"But when we were at a distance of two farsangs from him (about six English miles) he came to meet us himself, and as soon as he saw us, alighted (from his horse), fell on his face and thanked God. He held dirhems (coins), which he threw at us. He set up for us tents where we stayed. We reached him on the 12th of Muharram in the year 310 (11th May, 922), and the journey from Jurjān, the metropolis of Khwārizm (Turcostan?), occupied 70 days. We remained in the tents up till Wednesday, before the kings of his land and his lords had gathered to listen to the reading of the letter. On Thursday we spread both the carpets which we had brought with us, put on the back of a horse a saddle becoming to the occasion, caparisoned him in black <sup>1</sup> and covered his head with a turban. Then I took out the letter from the Caliph and read it while he (the King) stood on his feet. Then I read the letter from the Vizir Hāmid ibn al-'Abbās, and he continued to stand, although he was of a bulky constitution, while his suite threw dirhems at us. We took out the presents and handed them over to him. Then we put on his wife, who was sitting next to him in accordance with their custom, the dress of honour (*hila*). There were kings on his right side, we were invited to sit on his left, his children sat in front of him, and he sat alone on a throne which was covered with Byzantine braid. He gave order to bring a table before him on which was fried meat. He took a knife, cut off a bit and ate it, then another piece, and a third; then he cut a piece and handed it to the ambassador Sussen, before whom a small table was put. In such a way before each who sat in front of him a table was brought, and every one of us ate on a separate table; no one participates in another's food or takes from another's table. When the meal was finished, each of us took home with him what remained on his table. At the end a drink of honey called *sadjou* (or *sadjev*, or *sidjou*, perhaps the Russian sweet drink *suichovka*) was served round. Before our arrival they used to pray for him: 'God, bless the King Baltavar, the King of the Bulgars.' But I told him that God only is King, and it is not becoming for anyone to have such an appellation, especially from the cathedra (in public prayer). Your patron, the Commander of the Faithful, gave orders as to himself in the East and in the West, to pray from the cathedra: 'God bless thy slave and Caliph Ja'far, the *imām*

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<sup>1</sup> The official colour of the 'Abbāsids.



(the prince) Muktadir bi'llāh, the Commander of the Faithful.' Then, asked he, how should the prayer be made?—and I replied that one has to mention his name and the name of his father. To this he observed: 'But my father was an infidel, and I also do not wish to be mentioned by my name which was given to me by an infidel. But what is the name of my patron, the Commander of the Faithful?' 'Ja'far,' answered I; to which he said: 'Can I be called by his name?' And when I answered in the affirmative, he said that he would adopt for himself the name of Ja'far, and for his father the name of 'Abd Allāh, and gave orders to the Khatib (the man who pronounces the prayers to God) to that effect. Since then the prayers are there said thus: 'God, bless thy slave Ja'far ibn 'Abd Allāh, the sovereign of the Bulgars, the client of the Commander of the Faithful.'

The author of the *Narrative* then proceeds to describe what he calls "many wonders." These are simply the various physical phenomena which he was bound to notice in such a northern country as the kingdom of the Northern Bulgars, which was situated in what are now known as the regions of Kazan and Ufa. The very short and light nights in the summer and the very short days in the winter, the *aurora borealis*, the high birch trees with their intoxicating sap, the harmless serpents (adders), sometimes living in the houses of the people, all this to an Arab coming from Baghdad must have seemed very impressive, and gave much food for his imagination. He then gives the following description of what he observed among the people:

"I noticed that they reckon themselves blessed (make happy auguries) by the barking of dogs, and speak of a coming rich harvest, blessedness and prosperity. They have green, very sour apples. The girls eat them and grow fat. . . . Their principal food is millet and horseflesh, although there is plenty of meat and barley in their country. The King receives no share from what is sown, but each house contributes to him a bull's skin, and he also receives a share of the booty when an invasion of another country is ordered by him. They have no other oil except fish-oil, which they use in place of olive or sesame oil. They wear caps (Ḳalansuwah). The King goes out without a boy (page) and without any other companion. When he comes to the market every one rises, takes off his head-cover and puts it under his arm, till the King goes away. Also every one, young or old, even his children and brothers, as soon as they enter his room and see him, take off the ḳalansuwah and put it under the arm, then they turn their face towards him and sit down, then they rise again and sit no more until he so orders.

"The weather in their country is very often stormy. If lightning strikes a dwelling they no longer approach it, but leave it till time destroys it; they say it is a place on which the wrath of God rests. When a man is energetic and understanding in affairs, they say such a man is fit to serve God, and therefore they seize him, put a rope on his neck and hang him on a tree till he falls to pieces. . . . Men and women go to the river and bathe together naked, but in no way is there intercourse, and if one

transgresses, whoever he may be, he is taken to four poles which for this purpose are driven into the earth, tied to them by his hands and feet and cut in two from neck to leg. The same do they with the woman, and then hang each part of them on a tree. I tried to have the women covered from the men when bathing, but without success. They kill a thief in the same way as adulterers."

Up to this part Ibn Fudlān has been describing the Volga Bulgars, but now follows a description of what he calls Rūs :

"I saw the Russians when they arrived with their goods and stopped on the river Volga (at Itil), and I never saw men with more perfect limbs than they have, as if they were palm-trees. They are red-haired, they do not wear camisoles<sup>1</sup> or caftans (long coats), but the men wear cloaks which they fling round one shoulder so that one arm is free.<sup>2</sup> Every one of them carries with him inseparably a sword, knife and axe. The swords are broad, war-like (glittering ?), the blades are European work. Beginning from the top of the nail to the neck, every one has painted on him green trees, figures and other things."<sup>3</sup>

"Each of their women folk wears on her breast a small box made of iron, copper, silver or gold, according to the wealth and position of her husband. Each box has a ring to which a knife is fastened, also on the breast. (This passage is obscure in all the translations.) They wear on the neck gold and silver chains, because when a husband has 10,000 *dirhems* he makes a chain for his wife ; when he has 20,000 he makes her two chains, and so on ; when 10,000 dirhems are added, he gives another chain to his wife, so that often some of them have many chains on their necks. Their best ornaments are green beads of clay, those beads which are on the ships (which are brought on ships or which adorn

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<sup>1</sup> Harkavy uses the Russian word *Kurtka*. It is true that this word sounds like the original Arabian or Turkish from which it is evidently derived. But I have preferred Frähn's translation "Camisoles," as it corresponds more to the Arabian meaning of the word than to its meaning in present-day Russian, which we should have to translate into English as "jacket," which seemed misleading.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase I have translated from the German version of Frähn, as Harkavy's Russian version is quite incomprehensible. It would read in English something like this : "The man puts on a cloak with which he wraps one of his sides and lets out one arm from under it" (*obvivaet odin iz bokov i odnu ruku vypuskaet iz pod neya*).

<sup>3</sup> In the original the passage seems very obscure and each translator—the Danish Rasmussen, the German Frähn, the Frenchman de Sacy, and the Russian Harkavy—has his own interpretation. One ascribes the pictures to the sword, another to their dress, a third to the man's body, like tattoo. I have tried to keep close to the Russian translation, but the Russian meaning by itself is not clear. The difficulty is that in Russian the possessive pronoun "ego" is equally used in relation both to animate and inanimate things. Thus when Harkavy, without further explanation, uses here the word "ego," one is in doubt whether it means "his" or "its," that is, whether he refers to the man or the sword or the cloak. I have here, therefore, relied on the version of Baron de Sacy, although Harkavy thinks it doubtful, and Frähn positively rejects it.



ships). They endeavour to obtain them by any means; they pay a dirhem for one bead and string them on their wives' necklaces. They are the dirtiest of God's creatures. . . . They arrive from their country and anchor on the Itil, which is a great river, and build large wooden houses on its banks. In one house, there gather ten, twenty, also more or less. Each of them has a chair (better perhaps : a bench) on which he sits with his pretty girls to trade. . . .

" Every morning without fail a girl enters into their room with a big basin with water and puts it before her master, who washes in it his face, hands, and hair; he washes and combs them in the basin, then he cleans his nose and spits in it and there is no dirty thing that he does not do in this water. When he has finished all that he wants, the girl carries the basin to the next one, who does as his comrade did. But the girl continues to carry the basin from one to the other until all who are in the room are served, and each one clears his nose and spits in it, washes in it his face and hair.

" When their ships arrive in their place of anchorage, every one of them comes out carrying bread, meat, milk, onions and hot drink, and approaches a high pillar which has a human-like face and around which there are small figures, and behind these figures high pillars are set in the ground. He approaches the big pillar, falls to the ground before it and says, ' O Lord, I have arrived from afar, I have with me such and such a number of girls and such and such a number of sable skins,' enumerating thus all the goods that he brought with him. Then he says, ' I have brought this present to thee,' and leaves what he has brought in front of the pillar, saying, ' I wish thou wouldst let me have a merchant, possessing dinars and dirhems, who would buy from me everything I want to sell and would not object to my prices.' Then he would go away. If the sale is slow and lasts long, he will return with another present a second, or a third, time, and if his wish is not yet realised he will bring a present to one of the smaller figures and ask for its intercession, saying, ' These are the wives and daughters of our Lord,' and he will not omit to beg and pray for intercession and to bow humbly before each of them. And he will take a certain number of horned cattle and sheep, will slaughter them, and a part of the meat he will distribute among the poor, and the rest he will bring and throw before the big pillar and before the small ones which surround it, and will hang the heads of the horned cattle and sheep on the pillars, and when the night comes dogs gather and eat it. Then he who has done this will say : ' My Lord was gracious to me and ate my present.'

" When one of them falls ill they set up a tent at a distance, put him there and leave him with some bread and water, but they do not approach him, do not speak to him, even do not visit him during the whole time of his illness, especially if he is poor or a slave. If he recovers and gets up, he returns to them; but if he dies they burn his body, and if he is a slave they leave him in that position till dogs and birds of prey devour him.

" When a thief or robber is caught, they take him to a tall, thick tree, tie a strong rope round his neck, hang him and leave him so, till his body falls to pieces from the winds and rains."

## V.

*From the works of Abū'l-Hasan 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusain, known as al-Mas'ūdī (written between the 20th and 30th year and the fifties of the 10th century).*

Mas'ūdī is reckoned to be one of the most learned men Arabia has ever produced. Besides having studied much in various sciences and Mohammedan theology, he was also a great traveller. But although he passed the last forty-five years of his life (from 912 to 956 or 957) in constant travels, visiting Iraq, Armenia, the Caspian and its littoral, also Persia, India, Ceylon, Malay and the Chinese Seas, Egypt, Africa, Spain and other countries, he managed to leave more than twenty works, some of which comprise twenty to thirty volumes.

Harkavy translated twenty-four passages from Mas'ūdī's works, but most of them are not to our purpose, as they only mention the names "Russian" and "Slav" incidentally or repeat geographical information which has lost all its old importance.

I therefore only reproduce here those few fragments which contain descriptions of historical facts, whatever their real value may be.

"In their (the Slavs') country there are many rivers which run from the north. Not one of the lakes is salt, because their country is far from the sun and their water is sweet; but water which is near the sun is salt. The country lying further beyond to the north is not habitable on account of the cold and the abundance of water. The majority of their tribes are pagans who burn their dead and worship them. They have many towns, also churches in which bells are hung and are rung by beating them with a hammer, just as the Christians among us beat a board with a wooden mallet.

"The *Burjān* (Bulgars) are descended from Unan the son of Japhet. Their country is large and spacious. They attack the Greeks, Slavs, Khazars and Turks; most ferociously they attack the Greeks. The distance from *Kuṣṭantīniyah* (Constantinople) to *Burjān* is fifteen days' journey, and the country of *Burjān* is twenty days' journey long and thirty days' journey broad. The country is surrounded by a fence of thorns in which there are openings like wooden windows. It is like a wall with a ditch.<sup>1</sup> The villages have no such fences. The *Burjāns* are pagans and have no sacred book. The horses which they use for war are always freely grazing on the meadows, and no one rides on them except when there is war, and if a man in peace time sits on a war horse they murder him. On the march they are arrayed in lines, the archers

<sup>1</sup> The German translation: "wie eine Mauer an einem Graben." See *Sitzungsberichte* of the Academy of Vienna, 10 April, 1850, where a paper was read on the works of Mas'ūdī.

are in front, and the rear is formed of women and children. They have no gold or silver coins, and all their purchases and marriages are paid for with cows and sheep. When there is peace between them and the Greeks, they bring to Constantinople girls and boys of the Slavonic tribes and the Greeks."

"One of the various pagan nations which lives in the country of the Khazars is the *Şaḳālibah* (Sclavonians), and another the *Rus* (the Russians). They live on one of the two sides of the town: they burn the dead with their cattle, utensils, arms and ornaments. When a man dies, his wife is burnt alive with him; but when the wife dies the husband is not burnt. If a bachelor dies, he is married after his death. Women are glad to be burnt, for they cannot enter into Paradise by themselves. This usage also prevails among the Hindus, as we have said. But the Hindus never burn a woman with her husband, unless it is her own wish.

"From the upper course of the river Khazar (Volga), an arm branches off (the Don), that falls into a narrow gulf of the sea, Pontus, which is the sea of the Russians; for no nation except the Russians navigates this sea. They are a great nation living on one of the coasts of this sea. They neither have a king nor do they acknowledge a positive law (revelation, *sharī'ah*). Many of them are merchants and trade with the kingdom of the *Burghaz* (Bulgarians). The Russians are in possession of great silver mines, which may be compared with those in the mountain of *Banjhir* in *Khorasan*."

"The Russians consist of several different nations and district hordes; one is called *Luḍā'ānah*.<sup>1</sup> They go on their mercantile business as far as Spain, Rome, Constantinople and the Khazar. After the year 300 A.H. (912-13 A.D.) they had five hundred ships, every one of which had one hundred men on board: they passed up the estuary (of the Don) which opens into the Pontus and is in communication with the river of the Khazar (Volga). The king of the Khazar keeps a garrison on this side of the estuary, with effective military equipments to keep off any other power from this passage, and to prevent them from occupying, by land, that branch of the river of the Khazar which stands in connection with the Pontus, for the nomadic Turks, who are the *Ghuzz*, try frequently to winter there. Sometimes the water (the Don) which connects the river of the Khazar (Volga) with the above-mentioned estuary is frozen, and the *Ghuzz* cross it with their horses, for although it is a great stretch of water the ice does not break under them.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Various orientalists are inclined to interpret differently the corresponding word for this name in the Arabian text, and to make it refer to different nations. Harkavy seems to follow Frähn, who interpreted it as the people of *Ladoga*, which would really mean the people of *Novgorod*. The Polish historian, *Lelewel*, understood it to be the Slavonic tribe *Lutzanians* of *Lutsk* on the river *Styr* (*Les Loutzaniens de Lutzk sur Stir*). The French translator, *Barbier de Meynard*, prints "*Lithuanians*," with a mark of interrogation, and so on.

<sup>2</sup> We have used here the translation of *Aloys Sprenger*, which seems more correct than *Harkavy's*, whose Russian version of this passage would have to be rendered in English as follows: "The *Ghuzz* cross it with their horses *because* the water is great and does not break under them when frozen hard," which is rather a confused translation of the Arabian text.

"The king of the Khazar himself frequently takes the field against them, if his garrison is too weak to drive them back, and he prevents them from passing over the ice, thus defending his dominions. It is impossible for the Turks to cross the river in summer.

"When the Russian vessels came to the garrison, at the entrance to the estuary, they sent to the king of the Khazar to ask his permission to pass through his dominions, to go down the river, and enter into the sea of the Khazar which is in the sea of Jurjan, Tabaristān, and of other places of the Babarians (or Persians) as we have stated, promising him half the plunder which they should make from the nation that lives on the coast of this sea. He gave them leave. They entered the estuary, and continuing their voyage up the river (Don), as far as the river of the Khazar (Volga), they went down this river, passed the town of Itil, and at its mouth entered the sea of the Khazar. This is a very large and deep river. By these means the Russians came into this sea, and spread their predatory excursions over al-Jail, al-Dailam, Tabaristān, Abaskūn, which is the name for the coast of Jurjān, the naphtha country, and towards Adharbaijān the town of Ardabīl which is in Adharbaijān and about three days' journey from this sea. They shed blood, plundered property, made children and women prisoners, and sent out predatory and incendiary corps in all directions. The inhabitants of the coasts of this sea were thrown into consternation, for they had never had to contend with an enemy from these quarters; for the sea had only been frequented by peaceful traders and fishing-boats. They had been at war with al-Jail, al-Dailam and the leader of the forces of Ibn Ibi 'l-Sāj, but with no other nation.<sup>1</sup> The Russians landed on the coast of the naphtha country which is called Bākuh, and belongs to the kingdom of Shirvan-Shah. On their return from the coast the Russians landed on the islands which are near the naphtha country, being only a few miles distant from it. The king of Shirvan was then 'Alī ibn al-Haitham. As the merchants sailed in boats and vessels in pursuit of their commercial business to those islands, the Russians attacked them; thousands of Moslems perished, and were partly put to the sword, partly drowned. The Russians remained several months in this sea, as we have already said. The nations on the coast had no means of expelling them, although they made warlike preparations and put themselves in a state of defence, for the inhabitants of the coast on this sea are well civilised. When they had made booty and captives, they sailed to the mouth of the river of the Khazar (Volga), and sent messengers with money and booty to the king, in conformity with the stipulations which they had made. The King of the Khazar had no ships on this sea, for the Khazars were not sailors; if they were, they would be of the greatest danger to the Moslems. The Larisians (the Alares of the Middle Ages) and other Moslems in the country of the Khazar heard of the conduct of the Russians, and they said to their king: 'The Russians have invaded the country of our Moslem brothers; they have shed their blood and made their wives and children captives as they were too weak to resist; give us leave to oppose them.'

<sup>1</sup> Here I have again had to use Sprenger's version, which differs very much from Harkavy's, who instead of the word "they," referring to the inhabitants of the coasts of the Caspian Sea, uses the word "The Russians." Perhaps the difference is due to the alternative versions of the original Arabic

"As the king was not able to keep them quiet, he sent messengers to the Russians, informing them that the Moslems intended to attack them. The Moslems took the field and marched against them, going down the banks of the river. When both parties saw each other, the Russians left their vessels and formed their battle array opposite the Moslems. In the ranks of the latter were many Christians of *Itil*. The number of the Moslem army was about fifteen thousand men, provided with horses and equipments. They fought three days, and God gave victory to the Moslems. They put the Russians to the sword, others were drowned, and only 5,000 escaped, who sailed (first) along the bank of the river, on which Bartas (or Autas) is situated; (then) they left their vessels and proceeded by land. Some of them were slain by the inhabitants of Bartas, and others came into the country of Burghaz (the Bulgars), where they fell under the sword of the Moslems. There were about 30,000 dead counted on the banks of the river of the Khazar. The Russians did not make another such attempt after that year.

"The story of the Russian ships, which we have related, is generally known among all nations who live there. I have forgotten the exact date of their expedition, but it happened after 300 A.H. Perhaps those who maintain that the sea of the Khazar is connected with the strait of Constantinople mean by the sea of the Khazar, the sea Mayotis, and the Pontus, which is the sea of the Burghaz and Russians. God knows how this is."

"In Slavonic countries there were buildings which the Slavs held in respect. Among others there was a building on a mountain about which philosophers have written that it is one of the high mountains in the world. There is a tale of the materials of its construction, of the arrangement of its various stones and their various colours, of openings made in its upper part and what is erected in the openings for observation of the rise of the sun (or: of the sun rising in these openings), of the precious stones and signs made there which foretell future events and give warning of them before they take place, of sounds heard in its upper part and what happens to the listeners to them (or: of the impression they make on the listeners).<sup>1</sup> Another building was set up by one of their kings on a black mountain; it is surrounded by wonderful waters of various colour and taste, known for their curative qualities. There was inside it a big idol in the shape of an old man holding a stick, with which he stirred the bones of dead men in a grave. Under his right leg were figures of various kinds of arts, and under his left leg—figures of very black crows, of black wings and others, also figures of strange Aḥābīsh (Abyssinians) and Zanj (Zanzibars).

"There was yet another building on a mountain surrounded by an arm of the sea. It was built of red corals and green emeralds. In the middle of it there is a great dome under which stands an idol, whose limbs are made of precious stones of four kinds: green chrysolite, red ruby, yellow chalcidon and white crystal, and its head is of red gold. Opposite it there is another idol in the shape of a girl who brings him offerings and incense. The erection of the building is ascribed to some wise man who lived among them in ancient times. In our previous books we have already quoted a narrative on his deeds in the land of the Slavs, on his magic,

<sup>1</sup> Harkavy notices here that this passage, as well as some of what follows in the original, is very difficult to translate.



cleverness and mechanisms (there is a variation : 'on spaces, mountains and artificial channels') by which he captured their hearts, became master of their souls, charmed their minds in spite of the roughness of the Slavonic character and the difference in their natures. God is the possessor of grace."

In commenting on this description of three Slavonic temples Harkavy expresses his opinion, which is strengthened by very solid arguments, that Mas'ūdī, who evidently took his tale from some other book, must have here mixed up the Slavs with the Buddhists and Shamans, whose temples, indeed, present many features resembling those of Mas'ūdī's narrative. "In expressing this opinion," says Harkavy, "we beg that it should be taken as it is given, that is, as a simple conjecture, to explain this strange and fabulous tale of Mas'ūdī's source."

## VI.

*From the Book of Roads and Countries of Abu'l-Kāsim Muḥammad known as Ibn-Haukal (written about 976-77 A.D.).*

The date of the writing of the *Book of Roads and Countries* as given by Harkavy, *i.e.*, 976-77, does not coincide with the date given by Sir William Ouseley, who, in his *Oriental Geography of Ebn Haukal* (London, 1800), comes to the conclusion that "we cannot reasonably assign a later date to the composition of this work than the middle of the 10th century." *The Encyclopædia of Islam* (London and Leyden) also gives the date of writing as 977, but it seems very strange that the author of the corresponding article in the above-mentioned *Encyclopædia* in its bibliography omits altogether such a highly important work as Sir W. Ouseley's. But whenever the *Book of Roads and Countries* was written, its author seems to be a very much travelled merchant of Mosul, who, perhaps even more than on his own impressions, relied on other authors.

Harkavy has translated eighteen short extracts from this book. Many of them relate to the Khazars or generally represent geographical descriptions of no importance. The only fragments which have some ethnical or historical interest are given below :

"The Russians (Rūs) consist of three tribes ; one near Bulgar ; their king dwells in a town called Kūyābah.<sup>1</sup> This is larger than Bulgar. Another tribe is called *Orthani* or Arthai ; their king resides in a place

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<sup>1</sup> Ouseley spells it Gounabeh.

called *Artha* ; the third tribe, which is called *Slavia*,<sup>1</sup> lies higher up than these ; but no one goes for the purposes of traffic further than Bulgar. No one goes to *Artha*, because there they put to death any stranger whom they find. But they come down the river and carry on trade, telling nothing of their business and goods, and not allowing anyone to accompany them or to enter their country. They export from *Artha* black sables, black foxes and lead.

“ The Russians dress in small *kurtki*, but the Khazars and Bulgars in long ones.

“ Some of the Russians shave the beard, but some twist it like a horse’s mane and dye it yellow (or black).”

The information given by Ibn-Haukal about a Russian tribe of Ortanians who murdered foreigners, and to which another Arabian writer adds that they ate them, according to Harkavy, who relies on the opinion of the eminent numismatist, P. V. Savelyev, is one of those rumours which the Bulgars spread for the purpose of frightening away merchants from going to trade with the Russians, trying by this means to keep the monopoly of the Volga trade. The Genuese used to spread similar absurd rumours about the great dangers to be met on the routes to India. Frähn connects these rumours with the tales of Herodotus about the Androphagi of Scythia.

## VII.

*From the Book of Sciences (Catalogue) of Abū'l-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Ishāq called Ibn Abī Ya'kūb an-Nadīm (written 987-88 A.D.).*

The author seems to have lived in Baghdad and was something like a bookseller judging by his nickname *al-Warrāk*. In any case, he is held to be the “ father of Arabian literary history ” (see Joseph Hammer, *Literaturgeschichte der Araber*). But he was not only an eminent historian of Arabian literature : his works are of great importance also for Greek and Persian literature. His contribution to the knowledge of Russian writings was, however, very small ; it seems to consist of only a few lines, though even these are of a certain importance for the historian. They are as follows :

“ I was told by one of whose veracity I have no doubt that one of the Tsars of the mountains *Ḳabḳ* (Caucasus) had sent him to the King of the Russians ; he assured me that they possess writings which are cut

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<sup>1</sup> Ouseley spells it *Jellabeh*. Otherwise in translating this passage on the three tribes I have followed Ouseley’s version.

on wood. He also showed me a bit of white wood on which there were signs, but I do not know whether they represented words or separate letters. They were like these."

These signs are not reproduced in Harkavy's book and are declared by him, as well as by such an authority on the origins and records of the Russian writings and language as I. I. Sreznevsky, to be indecipherable.

In connection with this evidence of Ibn al-Nadīm on the literacy of the ancient Russians, it is not superfluous to add here the few lines reproduced by Harkavy from another Arabian writer.

### VIII.

*From the Book on Agriculture in Nabatai by Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn 'Alī ibn Kais al-Kasdānī, known as Ibn Wahshīyah (written about 930).*

Abu Bakr was one of the great Arabic scholars who, belonging by race to the Assyrians, endeavoured to resuscitate the ancient glory of this race by publishing works which he ascribed to his ancestors, the ancient Babylonians. European Orientalists hold that these were his own works, though some, like D. A. Khvolson, maintain that they were genuine ancient writings.

The few lines translated into Russian by Harkavy are as follows :

"I wonder about the Slavs who, in spite of their extreme ignorance and remoteness from all science and wisdom (philosophic thought ?), have decided to burn all their dead so that neither the King nor any other man is left unburnt after death."

### IX.

*From the Book of Precious Treasures of Abu 'Alī Ahmad ibn 'Umar ibn Dustah (written about the thirties of the 10th century).*

The author of this book is very little known except that he himself tells us that he visited Medina in 290 A.H. (903 A.D.). By this and by some quotations of his from predecessors and contemporaries, it is rightly assumed by his first Russian translator Khvolson that Ibn Dustah must have written his book not later than the first decades of the 10th century. As just mentioned, the first translation into Russian from Ibn Dustah's work was made by the eminent Russian Professor D. A. Khvolson, who published in 1869 with a translation and commentaries

those parts of the Arabic original which relate to the Khazars, Burtas, Bulgars, Magyars, Slavs and Russians. A copy of the original Arabic manuscript is to be found in the Library of the British Museum. Harkavy has used the Arabic text printed by Khvolson in a very much corrected form, but in some passages has differed from him in the translation of them.

An unknown Ukrainian writer, K. Sheikovsky, in 1870 reprinted in Ukrainian, from Khvolson's version, the passages relating to Russia, with some notes showing that Ibn Dustah was describing the actual ancestors of the present Russians, by whom Sheikovsky certainly means the Ukrainians (Little Russians), or, as he calls them, the Ruthenians.

Here we give only a translation of those fragments which directly concern our subject, that is, the Slavs and Russians. It is made from the Russian version of Harkavy, but I have also used the notes of Khvolson and some of Sheikovsky's.

However, not to fatigue the reader with many footnotes, it is well to add that the reader must not take all the information given by Ibn Dustah as absolutely true. As Khvolson points out in his very learned and copious commentaries, much that Ibn Dustah relates may be proved historically true by evidence from other sources and records, but also much was repeated by him as hearsay from persons who were evidently misinformed and ignorant. Besides, in his description of the Slavs, he makes no difference between the various peoples belonging to the Slavonic race, and often what may be true in speaking of one branch of the Slavonic race proves to be altogether wrong when applied to another branch, though belonging to the same race and having otherwise much in common.

"The distance between the country of the Badjnaks and that of the Slavs is 10 days' travel. At the very frontier of the country of the Slavs there is a town called Kuyab (Khvolson in correcting the Arabic original makes it read Cracow, and Harkavy suggests Kiev [but as far as one can spell the original, it is *Way*, which certainly does not give an idea of any Slavonic city]). The way to their country is over steppes, lands without roads, across rivers and through thick forests. The country of the Slavs is flat and wooded, and they live in forests. They have no vineyards, neither have they cornfields. They make of wood a kind of jugs, which serve as bee-hives and also as vessels for keeping honey. They call them *sidj*, and one jug holds about ten cups of it. They pasture pigs like sheep (Khvolson translates: they breed pigs as well as sheep). When one of them dies they burn his body. The women, when one of their family dies, scratch their hands and faces with a knife. On the next day after the burning of the dead, the ashes are collected into an urn which is put on a hill. After a year has passed they fill 20 jugs, sometimes more, some-

times less, with honey (sweet drink) and carry them up that hill, where the family of the dead gather, eat, drink, and then depart. If the dead man had three wives and one of them asserts that she loved him very much, then two poles are brought to the body which are dug in the earth, a third pole is put across them, to the middle of which a rope is fastened; the woman stands up on a bench and ties the end of the rope round her neck. Then the bench is taken away from under her and she remains hanging till she is strangled to death, after which she is thrown on the fire where she is burned. They are all pagans. They sow mostly millet. During the harvesting they put millet grains in a jug, raise it towards the sky and say: 'Lord, thou, who hast given us food (till now) give us also at present in abundance.'

"They have various kinds of lutes, *gusli* (dulcimers?) and pipes (*svirel*). Their pipes are two ells long, their lutes have eight strings. Their strong drink is prepared from honey. During the burning of their dead they are given up to enjoyment, by this expressing their joy that God has shown his graciousness to the dead. They have few working beasts and only one man mentioned above (Khvolson thinks this must refer to the prince; there is a gap in the Arabic manuscript) possesses riding horses. Their weapons consist of javelins, bucklers and lances. They have no other weapons."

"Their chief is crowned. They obey him and strictly follow his orders. His residence is in the middle of the country of the Slavs. The above-mentioned person whom they entitle 'chief of chiefs' is known among them as Sviat-Tsar. (Khvolson reads it as *Sviatopolk*.) This person stands higher than the subanedj (*zhupan*), who is only a vice-royal. This Tsar possesses riding-horses. His food consists only<sup>1</sup> of mare's milk. He has also beautiful, strong and valuable mail armour. The town in which he resides is called Djarvab (? Khvolson thinks that it is Khorvat or Gradist, now known as Gradište). Three days in each month there is a fair. The cold in their country is so severe that each one digs himself something like a cellar, on which a sharp-pointed wooden roof is built like the roofs on the Christian churches, and is covered with earth. Whole families remove into such cellars, and taking wood and stones light the wood and by it warm the stones till red-hot. Then water is poured on them which produces steam. The latter warms the dwelling so much that the people inside it have to take off their garments. They remain in such a dwelling till spring. Their Tsar makes a visiting tour of his people every year. If one has a daughter the Tsar takes one of her dresses, and if a son the Tsar also takes one of his garments each year. He who has no daughter neither son gives one of his wife's or his servant-maid's dresses. When a thief is caught, the Tsar orders him to be strangled or to be given into the surveillance of one of the governors on the frontiers of his possessions.

"Russia is situated on an island which is surrounded by a lake. This island inhabited by Russians occupies an area of three days' travel; it is covered with forests and bogs, is unhealthy and damp, so much that one

<sup>1</sup> This is evidently an exaggerated notion of the Slavonic Prince's food. The truth, as it is told by Wulstan (or Wulfstan), a monk of the 10th century, is that the Prince and most rich people used to drink horse-milk, whereas the poor and slaves drank mead.



has only to tread on the soil to make it quake on account of the abundance of water it contains.<sup>1</sup> They have a Tsar who is called *Hakan-Rus*. They invade the Slavs, they approach them on boats, descend on the coast, and capturing prisoners, carry them away to Khazran and Bulgar and sell them there. They possess no cultivated fields but feed on what is imported from the country of the Slavs. When a boy is born, an unsheathed sword is put before the new-born with the words: 'I will leave thee no goods, but thou wilt have only that which thou wilt obtain with this sword.'

"They have no immovable property, neither cities (or settlements), neither fields; their only industry is trade in sables, squirrels and other furs. The money which they receive in payment they fasten tightly in their belts. They dress uncleanly<sup>2</sup> and the men wear golden bracelets. They treat their slaves well, take care how they are drest because they use them (their slaves) in trade. They have a great number of towns and live spaciouly. They show respect to guests and are kind to foreigners who look for their protection, and generally treat well all who visit them, often not allowing anyone among themselves to offend or oppress such people, and in case a foreigner suffers any wrong or oppression he is assisted and defended.

"Their swords are Suliman's (or Seliman's—imported from the land of Seliman, from Khoressen). When one of their tribes asks for help, all march to the field; there is no disunion among them, but they fight unanimously against the enemy until he is conquered. If one has a case against another, he summons him to a trial before the Tsar who listens to their quarrel. Having received the Tsar's verdict, they act accordingly. But if both parties are dissatisfied with the verdict the Tsar leaves the final decision to the weapon: he whose sword is sharper, wins. Kinsfolk of both parties attend the fight armed.

"They have quacks, some of whom issue orders to the Tsar as if they were the chiefs of the Russians. They may happen to order sacrifices to be made to their God:—whatever they fancy, women, men, horses; and when a quack orders anything, it must be carried out. Taking a

<sup>1</sup> This story of the Russians living on an island, the soil of which is so full of water as to quake when trodden on, is well explained by Khvolson, who interprets it thus: A good many Russians under the name of merchants were engaged in sheer robbery of the inhabitants on the Caspian or the Black Sea, along the coasts of the Arabs, Persians, Greeks and others. They usually lived on some damp island at the mouth of the Volga or the Don. When they were encountered by Ibn Dustah or by any of his people and asked who they were, their answer would naturally be that they were Russians living on a very damp island and that they were merchants carrying on an honest trade. They would certainly not be inclined to give the true reason why they lived on such a damp island, on which no corn could grow, and they would say that they had no horses, towns, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Khvolson's translation is, "they love cleanliness in their dress." This difference in translation depends on the reading of the Arabic text. Harkavy reads it *naḍafa-t* (impurity), that is with a *d* instead of Khvolson's reading with a *t*, though it should be mentioned that some of the Arabic dictionaries translate the word *naḍafat* equally: impurity and purity.

man or animal the quack throws a noose over the victim, hangs him on a beam and waits till he is dead, and then says that it is a sacrifice to God.

"They (the Russians) are brave and courageous. In attacking another nation, they will not desist till they annihilate it wholly; they violate the conquered and reduce them to slavery. They are of tall stature, and have a good appearance and are brave in assaults; but they do not show this bravery on horseback, but all their invasions and campaigns are made from boats. They wear broad trousers (*sharovary*),<sup>1</sup> with a hundred ells of material to each pair. In putting them on they gather them in folds near the knee and tie them up. Not one goes to stool alone, but three comrades always accompany and guard him.<sup>2</sup> They all carry swords on them always, not being sure of each other as they are habitually insidious: if one succeeds in obtaining even a small property, his own brother or comrade will at once begin to envy him, and endeavour to appropriate it by murder or robbery.

"When one of their notabilities dies, a grave is dug for him in the form of a large house, and with his body there are buried his clothes, the golden bracelets which he has worn, also plenty of provisions, vessels with drinks and coins. At the end they put alive in the grave his favourite wife. After this, the grave is closed, and the wife is left there to die."

SEMEN RAPOPORT.

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<sup>1</sup> Sheikovsky calls attention to the fact that even in his time (the 2nd half of the 19th century) the Russians in the south (Rusins) used to wear broad leather belts for carrying money, and also trousers of immense breadth gathered in folds under the knee.

<sup>2</sup> Sheikovsky admits the fact but not Ibn Dustah's explanation. He says that they used to go to stool in company as they often do at present, simply for love of company, as the Russians hate to be alone.